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Objectifying the Subjective: Assessment and Feedback in Creative Arts Studio Learning and Teaching

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Abstract

This paper examines the Assessment and Feedback aspects of Studio Teaching as Creative Arts pedagogy. Prompted by USQ's newly offered Bachelor of Creative Arts (BCA), the author has developed an Assessment Matrix specifically designed to satisfy a number of imperatives, including:

- 'objectifying' the subjective aspects of creative practice as assessable coursework/research
- providing the means by which accurate, detailed, personalised and confidential feedback may be provided to students individually
- providing consistent, accurate, meaningful assessment records for student, lecturer, and institution
- ensuring consistency, continuity, and transparency of assessment processes and records to satisfy quality audits
- minimising marking and assessment time, whilst maximising assessment integrity and depth
- requiring only basic level skills and knowledge of a computer application already in common use (Microsoft Excel)
- adaptability to a range of creative courses - across disciplines

This Assessment Matrix has been in development (and trialled) since January 2009.

What's in this case study for you?

This Case Study will be of interest to you if you are teaching and assessing courses – particularly practice-led studio courses (and you have no time!).

Student learning issues addressed in this Studio

According to Boud (1995), "What are required are authentic assessments: 'contextualised complex intellectual challenges, not fragmented and static bits or tasks' (Wiggins 1989: 711)". Good assessment now is that which both closely reflects desired learning outcomes and in which **the process of assessment has a directly beneficial influence on the learning process**" (emphasis added).

Such an authentic, and I would suggest, 'integrated' student learning experience is certainly desirable. It should also be accurately reflected – in terms of both Grades and Feedback – throughout the student's entire academic journey.

There is therefore an overarching imperative that



assessment - and its mechanisms - encourage, reflect, measure, and demonstrate: "evidence of a 'journey', research elements, technical proficiency in the execution and presentation of the work, the aesthetic impact of the work and its ability to communicate". (Dally, Holbrook, Lawry & Graham. 2004).

Assessment of Learning and Teaching in Creative Arts Studio Practice often seems to be fraught with dilemmas. The question which emerges in addressing those dilemmas, is how to construct constructive, personalised, individualised assessment and feedback which is:

- academically rigorous
- professionally relevant
- able to simultaneously lay-it-on-the-line, yet support, encourage, and reflect each student's development

To achieve that, there are some *immediate* imperatives to be considered and satisfied in the assessment process.

Objective/Subjective:

An ongoing issue in the assessment of any 'arts' or creative course is the 'assessability of the subjective'. The slippery notion of art, aesthetics and personal taste – the variable tastes of various people - both student and assessor. So for academic assessment purposes, we need some kind of mechanism which articulates an assessment of the *aesthetically subjective*, which can comfortably co-exist alongside the much less difficult to assess, *technically objective*.

Consistency, Continuity & Transparency:

In these days of quality audits, student evaluation of courses and lecturers, the odd student appeal or dispute over grades, etc., the need for consistency, clarity, continuity and transparency,

has never been more acute.

In my view, acknowledging and satisfying these needs is in *everyone's* best interests. Not only the students themselves, but the lecturer and the university - for there to be a clear, consistent, and transparent 'paper trail' ('e-trail?'), whereby it is apparent to any student and/or lecturer - at any time, during their journey - that their work has been and is being assessed in a consistent and transparent (yet confidential) manner, against stated and agreed criteria. And which readily allows for quick-reference comparisons which might expose patterns or trends such as: consistency/inconsistency; development/stagnation of learning; and indicate possible reasons for those patterns etc., from one assessment item to another.

Feedback:

Feedback can be a subtle and delicate beast at the best of times, serving many purposes. Not only does it comment on the immediate - whether good, bad or indifferent - feedback is surely one of the most crucial aspects of student development and motivation for future academic and/or professional growth and achievement.

Written feedback should provide not only those 'words-of-wisdom' from the assessor, but, more importantly perhaps, provide the catalyst for a *discussion* between student and assessor – either immediate or ongoing (preferably both).

Time:

This is a commodity which none of us seem to have anymore. Yet the demands of: bureaucracy; technology; quality assurance; reporting; feedback; student consultations and expectations, etc., seem to demand more and more of it. How can we deliver the kind of depth



and quality of assessment we would like to, when we spend much of our time - amongst all those many other things - framing our assessment responses and feedback in such a way that they won't come back and bite us – probably because we didn't have sufficient time to spend on them in the first place? (*is that a circular argument?*).

To cut a long (and time-consuming) story short... we don't have a lot of Time. So, we need to *minimise* marking time, yet *maximise* assessment depth.

Computer Literacy:

With the mind-boggling array of computer applications and online environments with which we need to be not just familiar, but skilled enough to drive with confidence and competence - just to get through any normal academic day – we might find ourselves asking the question: “*just how many computer applications can one feeble academic brain possibly cope with?*” Let's keep it simple shall we? Let's limit our assessment logistics to one relatively basic program: 'Microsoft Excel'. This commonly used spreadsheet program does not require specialist knowledge, as long as we restrict ourselves to its fairly basic functions.

Interdisciplinary Adaptability:

In the contemporary university context there seems little point in creating an Assessment Matrix which is usable for only one course or discipline. This Assessment Matrix has been specifically designed to cater for and satisfy the additional and perhaps different imperatives of different courses, across different disciplines, across different faculties, and perhaps, who knows, across different universities (“today USQ, tomorrow the world”?!)

Strategy

a) Background

Prompted in part by USQ's new *Bachelor of Creative Arts* (BCA) degree, this Assessment Matrix development process has been informed by:

- observation of other assessment models
- assessment seminars etc. (particularly Assessment Futures)
- the evolution and development of my own assessment practices and processes over a number of years and across a number of disciplines

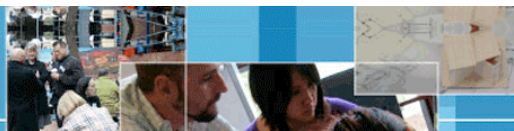
In development since January 2009, this Assessment Matrix has been (and currently continues to be) successfully 'road-tested' and fine-tuned by a range of lecturing staff, across various practice-led courses, in USQ's Faculty of Arts, Creative Media discipline – all of whom have provided course-specific feedback in order to evolve and enhance its overall usefulness and usability.

b) Studio Practice – the Assessment Matrix on-the-go

(N.B. In the interests of clarity, the following information should be read in conjunction with a [demonstration/illustration of an actual Assessment Matrix spreadsheet, however in overall structural terms](#))

Structure & Layout (Sheet 1):

Designed to be simple, quick, user-friendly and comprehensive – requiring a minimum of specialised computer knowledge - the spreadsheet is based on three (3) Assessment Items throughout a semester, and is divided, from Left-to-Right, as follows:



SUMMARY:

This section provides a 'one-stop' single entry point for all basic course data such as:

- Course Name, Year, Semester
- Lecturer/Assessor
- Student Names, Numbers, etc.

Information entered here automatically populates relevant cells throughout the spreadsheet – for all assessment items, and for all students.

This section reciprocally provides an automatically updated Summary of all marks achieved for each assessment item, in such a way as to be readily transferred into Gradebook (or equivalent).

... to the immediate Right is ...

ASSESSMENT ITEM 1 SUMMARY:

(typical/similar for Assessment Items 2 & 3 – colour coded)

This section provides an immediate Summary of the individual marks achieved by each student for each category of assessment within the assessment item.

It provides a single/central data entry point for:

- Marking criteria headings
- Respective weightings
- Assessment due dates, submission dates & extension dates
- Automatic updating of students' marks achieved - and calculates totals

... immediately below this section are:

INDIVIDUAL STUDENT MARKING & FEEDBACK SHEETS:

(similar for Assessment Items 2 & 3):

These are individual sheets, printable at one to an A4 page, which show individual marks achieved by each student per Assessment Criterion within the assessment item.

It provides a single data entry point for:

- Marking criteria headings & detailed sub-headings
- Marks/weightings available & achieved

As well as:

- Single-line feedback/comments relating to each criterion (refer Excel Sheets 2 & 3 from which to copy & paste 'Standard Comments')
- Capacity for more detailed, comprehensive & individualised feedback via in the 'Overall Comments' section
- automatic updating of *Due Date* & *Date Submitted* (from Summary above)

(N.B. Assessment Item Summaries 2 & 3 – colour coded - and associated Individual Feedback Sheets, to the right of Assessment Item 1 Summary, are similar in structure and layout but with the capacity for different Marking Criteria, weightings etc)

... to the immediate Right of these is ...

PARTICIPATION & ATTENDANCE:

Whilst attendance is not strictly an assessable component for these courses, this table provides a useful record of which students might be consistently absent and hence reflect poor grades



throughout a semester or at certain periods within it.

This table also provides a useful 'quick-reference' week-by-week timeline which marks critical dates/weeks such as:

- Assessment due dates (colour-coded)
- Mid-semester breaks
- Exam periods

In addition, the table provides for précis notes as to what was covered in any particular class - which should match up with the week-by-week Study Schedule. This table also automatically calculates total attendance by each student over the semester (horizontal), as well as attendees per class per week (vertical) – if required.

Discussion

a) Benefits:

The Assessment Matrix is, and is designed to be:

- Simple
- Quick
- User-friendly
- Comprehensive

Students are handed an *Assessment Criteria Sheet* - for each assessment item - at the commencement of the semester. These *Assessment Criteria* are reflected in all paperwork – including the *Individual Marking & Feedback Sheets*, so there is no doubt or confusion as to what is being assessed, when.

The Assessment Matrix simultaneously demands, articulates and demonstrates: transparency, consistency, clarity, continuity – and by default encourages/enhances communication between lecturer and student.

Accurate record-keeping is inherent in its structure, as is the capacity for quick-reference monitoring of a student's progress (or otherwise) – through both Grades and Feedback. Academics are thus better appraised of, forewarned of the potential for, and better protected from, erroneous accusations/disputes over grades, inconsistencies or bias, and also more readily comply with (internal and external) quality audits etc.

b) Problems encountered:

Minimal. After an initial 'time-hungry' period of design, layout and set-up, the Assessment Matrix has been an ongoing work-in-progress. Throughout its *informal* implementation, testing and feedback over two semesters, its continued development has been incremental: 'Adjustments' - rather than 'redesign'. 'Additions' - rather than 'rebuilding'.

Student feedback and improvements

a) Student Feedback:

Student feedback about their detailed individual marking/feedback sheets has been universally positive – summed up by the following student comment:

"The detailed feedback is great – I know exactly what I need to focus on for the next assessment or semester" (Student)

The students clearly acknowledge and appreciate the comprehensive detail within the feedback, which underscores the fact that their lecturers "care enough about them to spend ... time considering their situation and that their work is



worthy of ... attention. You are both affirming the worth of the person and offering them your views on something into which they have put some effort" (Boud, 1991/94).

Creative Media colleagues' enthusiasm acceptance of the Assessment Matrix and what it affords them - in terms of time-saving, record-keeping and capacity for comprehensive feedback - has been demonstrated by their willingness to adopt and adapt it to their own courses - and by providing ongoing feedback for the purposes of further development and fine-tuning.

b) Improvements:

The Assessment Matrix has and continues to undergo ongoing development and fine-tuning through day-to-day use. It is now 'pretty close' to its final form, and has recently been formally adopted for implementation across the Creative Media discipline in S1, 2010. Once this occurs, the active process of: *Implementation; Analysis; Feedback* (staff and students); and *Action*, will no doubt continue up to the point at which it is demonstrated to be, for all practical purposes, a broadly applicable assessment and feedback mechanism - particularly for practice-led studio learning and teaching - across a broad range of creative disciplines.

Guidance for colleagues

The Assessment Matrix initially took a lot of time to create and set-up. Ultimately however, the imperative of 'saving time' continues to be demonstrated in its day-to-day use in the practical studio teaching situation. Now that a Template has been created and it is largely a matter of simply 'filling-in-the-assessment-criteria', my suggestion would be to acquire/adapt such a Template, rather than each of us individually 'reinventing the wheel' for each studio course that we teach.

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More information

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